

GARDEN & GUN

FEBRUARY / MARCH 2009

SOUL of the NEW SOUTH

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Breakfast
in Texas

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Anatomy of a Classic

Feelin' Gravy

Dallas chef David Bull gives the workingman's breakfast an elegant update



Hope You're Hungry
Fried sage leaves add a touch of flavor and flair to an old favorite.

IF YOU EVER WANT TO EAT like a lumberjack without doing a lick of work, you might stop by the **Stoneleigh Hotel & Spa** in Dallas and let Chef David Bull fix you a plate of savory biscuits smothered in sausage gravy.

Although food lore traces this countrified dish back to Appalachian logging camps—the reason for the term *sawmill gravy*—Bull has embraced it as part of his culinary signature. “I’ve put biscuits and sausage gravy on the menu at every Texas hotel restaurant where I’ve worked,” he says. “It’s warm and comforting, but also unexpected.”

Biscuits and sausage gravy will forever be regarded as a classic Southern workingman’s breakfast: hearty and inexpensive, with a tiny bit of meat able to feed a mess of laborers. In some parts of the South, the dish is still referred to as “poor-do,” which speaks to its economy, or “life everlasting,” testimony to its staying power.

Traditionalists will find it easy to spot Chef Bull’s refinements. Although “cat head” biscuits are typically pinched from the dough and dropped on the baking sheet by hand, the chef cuts his elegant version from rolled dough. Brushing the top of each biscuit with heavy cream before baking does more than bestow a glossy sheen. It creates a light crust that can hold its own against the gravy (without getting soggy) and keeps the interior layers tender and moist: “Like searing a piece of meat,” says the chef. Heavy cream also enriches the white gravy, while aromatic fresh sage leaves bring out the best in the fresh pork breakfast sausage, another staple of the Southern kitchen.

“We get a lot of international tourists at the hotel, and biscuits with sausage gravy represents a little bit of American culture for them,” Bull says. “They may not know the history. But it sure does brighten their day.”—Francine Maroukian

Cat Head Biscuits & Sausage Gravy

Yield: 8 biscuits and 1 quart sausage gravy; serves 4

Biscuits

2 cups cake flour
1/2 tsp. baking powder
1/2 tsp. baking soda
1/2 tsp. salt
2 tbsp. sugar
1/4 cup shortening
1/2 cup heavy cream plus several tbsp.
for brushing biscuits
1/2 cup milk
1 cup buttermilk
1 cup flour, for rolling
2 tbsp. unsalted butter, melted

Preheat oven to 425°F.

In a bowl, sift together the cake flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt, and sugar. Cut in the shortening with your hands, gently rubbing the mixture back and forth between your fingertips until it resembles coarse crumbs. Gently stir in the heavy cream, milk, and buttermilk until a sticky dough forms. Turn the dough out onto a floured surface. With lightly floured hands, gently knead the dough, overlapping it on itself



The Real Deal Below left: Dallas chef David Bull. Clockwise from above: Ingredients for Bull's sausage gravy; Bull uses a rolling pin and a cutter for a refined take on "cat head" biscuits; gravy ready for the plate.

two or three times (to create layers in the finished biscuits).

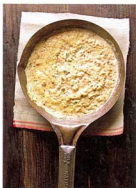
Using a rolling pin, roll the dough out to 1-inch thickness. Using a floured 3-inch biscuit cutter, cut out 8 biscuits (by punching down with the cutter; do not twist). Place biscuits on a cookie sheet, and brush the tops with heavy cream. Bake for 15 to 20 minutes, until biscuits are risen and golden brown. Immediately—while biscuits are still hot from the oven—brush the tops with melted butter.

Sausage Gravy

2 tbsp. unsalted butter
1 small yellow onion, peeled
and small diced (about 1/2 cup)
1 tbsp. finely chopped
fresh sage leaves
2 tsp. flour
1/4 lb. breakfast sausage (not links),
cooked and finely crumbled
2 cups half-and-half

2 cups heavy cream
1/4 tsp. cayenne pepper
Salt to taste
Lemon juice to taste
Tabasco to taste
Worcestershire to taste

In a large sauce pot over medium heat, melt butter until almost foamy. Add the onion, and cook until it appears translucent, about 2 to 3 minutes. Add the sage, stirring frequently. Do not brown. Quickly stir in flour. Add the sausage, half-and-half, and heavy cream, and bring sauce to a boil. Lower heat and simmer until liquid is slightly thickened, about 10 minutes. (Adjust heat so liquid does not simmer over the sides of the pot.) Add cayenne pepper, and season with salt, lemon juice, Tabasco, and Worcestershire to taste. Puree until smooth and combined: Use an immersion blender (in the pot) or transfer the



liquid to a blender or a food processor and work in small batches.

Fried Sage Leaves

(for garnish)
Vegetable oil as needed
(enough to "float" the leaves)
6-8 whole sage leaves
Salt to taste

Heat the oil in a heavy-gauge sauce pot with tall sides over medium heat until it reaches 325°F. Carefully drop each sage leaf into the hot oil, and turn once after 30 seconds. Cook until color darkens, about another 15 to 20 seconds, and remove the leaves from the oil. Place on a paper towel to drain, and season with salt.

To serve: Split each biscuit in half by hand (to leave surface crevices), lightly spread with butter, and toast until warmed. Working one biscuit at a time, arrange toasted halves in center of shallow bowl, and top with warm sausage gravy. Garnish with whole fried sage leaves.